

# Do Not Be Ashamed

Psalm 10:1-18, 2 Timothy 1:1-18 (ESV)

June 18, 2006

“Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.” “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord.” That is, do not be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We know all too well that people are ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ today. But what we may not realize is that being ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ was already a problem in the early days of the Christian faith. People today want to make the gospel fit into the way everyone else thinks about the world, as if it were only one faith among many, a matter of personal preference and choice, a quaint but harmless acknowledgment of the God of one’s ancestors. But a gospel that is not threatening is a gospel that cannot comfort, and so it is no gospel at all. Beware a gospel that makes no demands.

Already in ancient Ephesus and Rome, even people who at some level wanted to be members of the church were uncomfortable with all the fuss being made over the faith, uncomfortable with the suffering of Jesus Christ, uncomfortable with the challenge being made to Rome, and uncomfortable with prospects of suffering themselves. “Let’s be reasonable,” I can just hear them saying. “You can love Jesus in your heart. Just don’t make a public stand.” Some had already turned away from Paul, embarrassed, no doubt, and perhaps not a little afraid that he had been arrested and imprisoned. How unbecoming a minister of the gospel! Surely God would not approve of that! They wanted a respectable pastor. The priests of the other gods were not being arrested! Why did theirs have to be? So it was that Paul found it necessary to encourage Timothy and, perhaps, through him even admonish others not to be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We would do well to hear that word yet today.

“Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.” The basis of these powerful imperatives is the underlying gospel to which they refer. We need to hear that first before we can hear anything else. Paul presents that gospel to us here very succinctly. It has two parts: God saved us and called us to a holy calling. God saved us from what we were and called us to what we are to be. These two parts are distinct but inseparable. One looks back while the other looks forward. To have the first without the latter would go nowhere. But it would not be possible to have the

latter without the former. So, God both saved us from what we were and also called us to what we are to be. We will expand upon that in just a moment.

Before we get into those details of the gospel, it is worthwhile to acknowledge the reason and cause of the gospel. There is always someone who thinks that the gospel of Jesus Christ has to do with how good we are and with what wonderful things we do. It should be evident on the face of it that such a position is ridiculous, but it continues to get articulated and advanced down through the centuries. Again, there is always someone who thinks that the gospel of Jesus Christ has to do with how good we are and with what wonderful things we do. But think about that. If the gospel had to do with how good we already are, we would not need the gospel. If the gospel had to do with what wonderful things we already do, we would not need the gospel. If we were already that good and we already did such wonderful things, we would not need to be saved. The gospel would make no sense at all. But since we do have a gospel, that indicates that we do need to be saved, which is to say that we are not as good as we think and that the deeds we do are not so wonderful as we assume. Again, that should be obvious.

Nevertheless, Paul found it necessary to say again right here at the beginning of his articulation of the gospel that it is “not because of our works.” That had been a major argument running throughout his ministry. This assertion runs throughout his writings. Martin Luther rediscovered this in Paul’s writings 1500 years later, and that sparked the Protestant Reformation. The gospel of Jesus Christ is “not because of our works,” that is to say, it is not caused or brought about because of our good works. If anything, it is occasioned by our evil works. William Temple has expressed this as well as anyone:

All of us is God; the only thing of my own which I can contribute to my own redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed. My capacity for fellowship with God is God’s gift in creation; my partial deliverance from self-centeredness, my response to truth, beauty and goodness is God’s gift through the natural world which he sustains in being and the history of man which he controls. One thing is my own—the self-centeredness which leads me to find my apparent good in what is other and less than the true good. This true good is the divine love and what flows from it appreciated as its expression. In response to that good, man finds his only true freedom, for only then does the self act as what it truly is and thus achieves true expression....As the experience of grace becomes deeper, the conviction of its all sufficiency becomes more inevitable and more wholesome, until at last a man knows, and is finally ‘saved’ by knowing, that all good is of God

alone. We are clay in the hands of the potter and our welfare is to know it.<sup>1</sup>

Now, given that the gospel is “not because of our works,” it turns out that the opposite is true, that the gospel is due solely to the “purpose and grace” of God Almighty. The gospel has its origin solely in the goodness and initiative of God. The gospel has its accomplishment solely in the will and power of God. The gospel had its beginnings in the eternal decrees of God, and it came to its open expression in God’s good time in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was this “purpose and grace” of God “which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.” Again, it could not possibly be based on our works when it was given to us before we were. Instead, this has been part of the eternal will of God. And it was this “purpose and grace” of God “which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus.” Jesus was not a patch up job for a botched creation. Jesus was the point of the plan all along. So it is that all is of God, and for that we are grateful.

Given this background of the source of the gospel, now we come to the specification of the content of the gospel. Our Savior Christ Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Again, there are two parts to the gospel: Christ abolished death and brought us life instead. He put an end to our final enemy and he opened the door to life eternal. Of all the problems of human life—food and drink, clothing and shelter, social problems, psychological problems economic problems, political problems, military problems—of all the problems of human life and existence, this is the final one: in the end, we die. And it is not only the case that we die, but it is also the case that death is the wages of sin (Romans 6:23), which is to say that we die not merely of natural causes but even more we die because of our sin, our self-imposed estrangement from God. The greatest human problem has to do with this brokenness of our relationship with God. The true perspective on the human predicament is this theological one. The help we need most of all is help that God alone can provide.

All of this is to say what Paul says in many places, though he does not say explicitly here, that Christ’s conquering of death on our behalf is tied directly to the forgiveness of our sin. The way he abolished death for us is, oddly enough, that he died for us. He took upon himself on the cross the punishment for our sin. And because he died for our sin, the price has been paid for our sin, and thus we are set

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<sup>1</sup>William Temple, *Nature, God and Man* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1934), 401-402.

free from eternal death. That is how he abolished death. And that is why this is gospel, good news, a saving word of grace, beyond what we could imagine or dare to hope. In Jesus Christ, God has provided for the forgiveness of our sin and therefore for the abolishment of our death. This by itself is more than we deserved. And this is only the first half of the gospel.

The second half of the gospel is that he “brought life and immortality to light.” Not only did Jesus Christ abolish death for us, but also he has brought life to us. The second would not be possible without the first, but the second is more than a simple extension of the first. Not only has eternal death been abolished, but also and especially eternal life has been initiated. Not only has our estrangement from God been forgiven, but also provision has been made for us to live in the presence of God. Not only have we been justified, but also we have been redeemed. And even as Jesus conquered death by dying, so did Jesus bring “life and immortality to light” by his resurrection, by God raising him from the dead to a new and different life, eternal life, forever beyond the reach of death, and his resurrection is the promise of our own. That is the gospel. That is the good news. That is the word of God by which alone we live.

Given that this is the gospel of Jesus Christ, note what its implications were for Paul. It was this gospel for which, in his own words, “I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do.” His being a preacher and apostle and teacher did not lead to a life of ease. It did not lead to fame and glory. His being a preacher of the gospel, an apostle of Jesus Christ, and a teacher of the Christian faith led directly to his suffering, not only in various mistreatments along the way but also and particularly in his arrest, imprisonment, trial, and eventual execution. And how better could he preach the suffering of Jesus Christ than by suffering himself? Why should the servant expect any better than the master? Our Lord and Master suffered on our behalf. Why should we who would follow him expect any other? And this is where we get back to the initial imperatives about not being ashamed, since suffering is, in our feeble minds, intimately associated with the shame of suffering.

Not only is suffering bad in and of itself, but also and even more so there is always the suspicion, the assumption or even the presumption that the suffering is somehow deserved, that the sufferer had it coming, that the sufferer brought it upon himself, and that is the source of our shame. And that is why Paul had to say, in direct contradiction of the natural human response and in order to counter the misunderstanding of the suffering necessarily inherent in the gospel, “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.” “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord.” That is to say, do not be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Of

what was there to be ashamed? The suffering, of course. The suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross. Think about it. Everyone else was worshiping great and glorious Roman gods. The Christians were worshiping a Jewish teacher who was crucified by the Romans outside Jerusalem. He had been crucified, dead, and buried. Who could be proud of that? So it was that Paul had to teach his hearers about the majesty of God hidden in the humility of Christ, about the glory of God hidden in the suffering of Christ, about the gift of God hidden in the sacrifice of Christ, about the divinity of Christ hidden in the humanity of Christ. It all seems backwards or upside down. It all seems shameworthy. But Paul has taught us that it is praiseworthy. And we are called to share in the suffering of the gospel by the power of God. It is not something we can do on our own. But God can work in us that which is greater than we can do on our own.

As an encouragement to Timothy and so to us, Paul offers himself as an example, even while he was writing from prison: “I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.” What joy, what confidence, and what faith is embodied in these words! Paul is not ashamed either of the prior suffering of Jesus Christ or of his own current suffering. And note that his joy about knowing Christ is not in the past tense. He is not talking about the earthly life of Jesus. He is talking about knowing Jesus Christ now, after the resurrection and ascension but before Christ’s return. He is talking about knowing the resurrected and living Jesus Christ now, and for this we give thanks. Moreover, he is confident in the continuing goodness and power of God, for he knows that Jesus Christ will guard and protect the gospel far beyond Paul’s ability, power, or responsibility to do so. “I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.”

As an additional encouragement to Timothy and so to us, Paul offers a friend as an example. “May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me.” Here was a man who understood the gospel. He was not ashamed of the cross of Jesus Christ, and he was not ashamed of the chains of a servant of Jesus Christ. He knew they were signs of authenticity and veracity. May God bless us with such faith and insight.

So it is that Paul exhorts Timothy to keep the faith. “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” Stand by not only the general content of the Christian faith but the very words by which you have learned and received it, the confession of faith which you learned from your grandmother and your mother, the confession of faith which you made when you were baptized, the confession of faith you were taught when you were

ordained. Keep the faith! “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me....Guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” Why is it today that so many people think that innovation is a good thing? Why is it today that so many people think it is a virtue to rewrite the Christian faith? Why is it today that so many people want to refashion the gospel to fit their own predilections? Why should we not be content to follow the pattern of the sound words we have received from those who have gone before us? Lord, help us!

Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

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